

S vs Rebirth 701

Chapter 701 Training

Because of the situation, Milfa also helped to transport the medicine to the affected area. Milfa didn't really showcase her power this time, considering she wanted to remain hidden from the spotlight.

However, her squad was enough to liberate all the demons that surrounded the city while delivering the medicine. So, the mission was completed without any problem.

After knowing Milfa was among them, Laufey didn't plan to show himself anymore. The others might not know, but he obviously knew the vice captain of his former squad and the strength she hid.

Damian and Milfa should have the power to stop him. And with the addition of her squad, it wouldn't be that hard to defeat the others.

So, Laufey chose to retreat.

The other reinforcement also came, liberating the Demon Barrier Squad from their current predicament.

She was slightly worried about Noel, so she tried to visit him once again before they returned to the base. But surprisingly, Noel had moved on and started working for tomorrow.

At the very least, it seemed that the setback would only motivate him to train harder instead of crushing his determination. Although she knew Noel planned to become a noble, it didn't change the fact that Noel would be useful as long as he kept working for the army. So, she wanted to make sure that Noel kept striving forward while in the army.

After a few days, the group had finally recovered and they were ready to return to the base. Of course, they had to go to the Demon Barrier Squad's headquarters first to meet Faust.

It seemed that Faust only wanted to express his thanks for their help. He also heard about the incident, so he didn't plan to do anything about it as gratitude.

As soon as they finished settling everything, the group returned to the headquarters, which took them six days.

During their travels, Noel seemed to be daydreaming a lot of times as though he was thinking about a lot of things. In fact, ever since that defeat, Noel became more quiet.

Of course, Noel wasn't trying to distance himself from them. He just wanted to think about a lot of things, including the lesson Damian gave him.

The group had to face Clara first, obviously with the record of the incident. Clara didn't say anything other than how glad she was knowing all of them were fine.

She even dismissed them to let them recover and give them time to get even stronger.

Though, Noel chose to visit her afterward to apologize.

As one would expect from a leader of the Demon Relief Squad, instead of blaming Noel, Clara actually pointed at herself and declared that she was the one at fault.

It was her fault that she let Noel proceed with everything. Just like the others, she planned to get better at discerning the situation so that she would be able to see through the danger and prevent the others from dying.

The result might be bad, but the Demon Relief Squad would surely get stronger.

Noel was truly glad that he was a part of the Demon Relief Squad.

The others chose to rest their body for one day so that they could train tomorrow. But Noel didn't have time to rest.

He had taken enough rest for his muscle to recover, so after dealing with everything, he came to a forest near the city. This was where he usually met Dimitri.

But this time, the one he was going to meet was Damian.

Noel was standing in front of Damian with his sword on his waist.

"Alright. Since we've finally returned to the city, it's time for me to teach you for real." Damian raised his finger. "I want you to answer one question first before we start. How do you think a Spirit correlates to your talent?"

Noel frowned. This was public knowledge, but Damian wouldn't ask him something that simple. It seemed that he wanted him to answer something else.

"I want to answer it with Spiritual Energy Reserve, but I think I will go with..." Noel paused for a few seconds before continuing, "The spirit's type?"

"No." Damian shook his head. "Well, this is a secret, but I think I can give it to you with my authority. The answer depends on yourself."

"It's true that Spiritual Energy Reserve and Conversion Rate can easily be reflected as your talent. In fact, this is the only way to measure your talent. However, have your Spirit told you the reason why they give you their power?"

"The reason... Ah!" It didn't take too long for Noel to realize the answer. He remembered the time Ardagan told him and the Moon Goddess confirmed his suspicions.

"The Spirits help humans because they want to see something. If humans become strong, their spirit abilities might differ from the spirits themselves. So, knowing there was another way to use their power was a benefit that the spirit could get, was what both of them said."

He finally remembered the words and noticed how they had been telling him to do it this whole time. Ardagan and Heisk had indeed provided him with powerful abilities, but they had told him that he could use their abilities in his own way. He was the one who never put any effort into it.

"It seems that you have realized it." Damian smiled. "The spirits want us to innovate and use our abilities in our own way. This is a mutual relationship between us and the spirits."

"Of course, doing it when you are too weak is hard. Not only is your Spiritual Energy Reserve small, but your control over Spiritual Energy is also weak. That's why we teach this only to Spirit Masters onward."

"I don't care what you plan to do, but I am going to tell you this one thing. The Spirit Abilities are powerful, but they are by no means perfect. If the strongest man in the world only relies on the same abilities, he will be bound to lose sooner or later. That's why you have to keep innovating and finding a new way to progress if you don't want to lose."

Damian pointed his finger at Noel. "At least one ability... I want you to at least master one ability."

Chapter 702 Answer

"At least, one ability. I want you to master one ability."

Noel's body shook with excitement. He knew that he had to go through this sooner or later. But having done it sooner would surely benefit him in the long run.

However, he had been trying to do everything from the description of the Spirit Abilities. He didn't know how to do it by himself.

There were a few options like the Soft and Hard Approaches or the communication with the Spirits. But he didn't know which one was the correct choice.

Damian could see through the confusion in his eyes. He added, "I will give you a demonstration first. You can use this as a reference, but you don't have to consider this as the only answer."

Damian snapped his fingers and a series of ice spikes came out of the ground. All of them were circling around him neatly as if trying to protect him.

"This is an Ice Barricade. And this is how the spirit uses it normally. However..." Damian waved his hand, retracting the Ice Spikes. After that, he snapped his fingers again. Suddenly, spikes appeared all over the area.

Each spot seemed to have at least five or six spikes and all of them were pointing in the same direction.

With one look, he noticed this was how the humans placed a barricade if they wanted to stop mounted fighters.

"I'm sure I don't have to explain it to you." Damian smiled. "So, you can think of a way to utilize your ability. Just like that Enhance Forward Rune that can be applied in all directions."

Noel looked down and shut his eyes tightly, falling into deep thought.

'The first form of the ice spikes is the original form, which is effective in protecting the person inside of it. But the second form is used when fighting against a mounted fighter. Of course, if he wants it, he could form the other types to match the situation.'

'I see. So, that's what he means by mastering the ability. You will know how to use it in all kinds of situations to suit your needs. The Spirits and Humans are two different beings, so it's clear that the way they fight is different. This is the reason for the spirits to support humans.'

Noel fell silent as though he had caught on to something. He noticed how Damian had used his power previously. In fact, he didn't think Paul had done something like this.

'Has Clara or Dimitri known about this? Well, I think a Captain should know how to do something like this at the very least, but I don't think Paul has done this.' Noel tried to recall the memories with Paul, thinking about using him as a reference.

Unfortunately, there was nothing that came into his mind. In the end, he changed his focus on the Greenwood Kingdom.

'That's right. I learned about Parabolic Movement in the Greenwood Kingdom. As one would expect from the kingdom that is known for its Spirit ian, the way they use their Spiritual Energy is different from us fundamentally.'

'In that case, I should strive to master one ability. The question is... what ability? Since I am ladre right now, I can't reveal my ice element. Then, should I use the Fire Element? No, maybe I can do something with the Sword Ability. Or should I just go for the runes?'

Noel was trying to find something that he was familiar with and had the biggest potential. Since this was the first step, he might mess up, so he wanted the ability to have a high potential so that he could clean up his mess this time instead of abandoning the ability.

While Noel was in deep thought, Damian was watching his expression as though he was trying to see through his thinking.

He muttered inwardly, 'In the Greenwood Kingdom, a normal Spirit Master will have a hard time even mastering one. Only a genius can master two or three abilities before becoming a Spirit Grandmaster. I wonder how he is compared to those geniuses? I admit that he has peerless talent, but this is different from it. Without a strong foundation, you won't be able to master a single thing.'

After some careful thought, he had chosen his ability. The most versatile and with the highest potential was the Undying Fire.

That was right, instead of using the Phoenix Wings or Undying Phoenix, he planned to master the one that made those abilities.

Damian wouldn't expect at that time that instead of mastering an ability, Noel would choose a different path, one that would blow his mind away. After all, how could he imagine that Noel would actually master his foundation instead of the Spirit Abilities?

Noel smiled.

"I have thought about what I want to master. Do I have to do something special?" Noel asked.

Damian nodded. "Well, it can be said to be special since you are going to do something that hasn't been done before. But before you proceed, I want you to think about it."

"What kind of path do you wish to take? If you have got the answer, then ask another question. How do you want this ability to help you? Then, what do you need in order for your ability to do that? Last but not least, can you proceed right now? If you can't, then you have to strengthen that part first before attempting it."

Noel closed his eyes, listening to Damian carefully.

'Undying Fire... This fire stems from Ardagan. And it's a free fire that can become everything. Back then, I used this ability to burn a crow, but I could use something else if I had enough control.'

"No, should I say that the Undying Phoenix, Phoenix Wings, and so on are derived from the Undying Fire itself? In that case, if I can master it, won't I be able to do anything?"

The moment he hit that realization, Ardagan reacted to him. Even though his eyes were closed, he could see the system in his mind.

[Mission: Undying Fire.]

[Description: You have become the owner of the Undying Fire. Choose the path you wish to take by yourself and strive for it. Becomes the true ruler of the Undying Fire.]

[Reward: ???]

Chapter 703 Path

"For now, you should sit down and try to think about it," said Damian while observing Noel's expression. It seemed that Noel had chosen something to master. However, he had to know whether that ability was promising or not. After all, if he chose an ability that was too hard to master, the process would take longer.

'There are a lot of people who are taking on a challenge by mastering a difficult ability to show people that they are talented in the Greenwood Kingdom. However, that's just an idiotic way of thinking. Most of them are hit by a huge wall that causes them to fall into despair. So, I hope that you are smart in this process as well.' Damian sighed. He couldn't let his guard drop until he could see some progress in Noel's ability.

Meanwhile, Noel followed his instruction. He sat in a lotus position. This was the most effective post when he was meditating. It helped him a lot while thinking about something.

Noel recalled all the questions Damian posed to him.

"What kind of path do you wish to take? If you have got the answer, then ask another question. How do you want this ability to help you? Then, what do you need in order for your ability to do that? Last but not least, can you proceed right now? If you can't, then you have to strengthen that part first before attempting it."

'What kind of path do I wish to take? It must mean what I want my power to become, right?' Noel instantly stopped at the first question. He was ready for this training, but he wasn't ready for the question.

He couldn't help but imagine the Undying Fire.

'Well, the Undying Fire can be shaped into anything. With the Undying Fire as the base, all my Spirit Abilities like the Undying Phoenix, Phoenix Wings, or even the Undying Fire Feathers, rely on the shape of the Undying Fire.'

'Does that mean my path is the control? I am going to control my Undying Fire?'

Noel couldn't help but fall silent. On the one hand, this path seemed to be effective. If he could control his flame completely, his battle power would increase tremendously. On the other hand, it felt like this wasn't the answer he wanted.

It was not because he was wrong, but it was something related to the third question.

'What do you need in order for your ability to do that... Of course, it's Control. But with how Sir Damian worded all those questions, it seems that he is trying to lead me from many options to only a few options. It means the next answer will be more specific than the previous one.'

'So, if Control is the third answer. What about the first question and second questions?' Noel paused for a moment. 'I don't know what kind of path I want it to take. So, maybe I should answer the second question first? But should I just go for the last question? Maybe the first and second questions aren't that relevant?'

A lot of thoughts and questions confused him. Noel couldn't help but ask, "Sir. What if I find the answer to the last question without finding the rest?"

Damian seemed to have expected this kind of question. He answered without hesitation. "You can proceed. But it will make your ability shallow. For example, you can improve it to one point, but you are limiting your ability only to that point. You should be aware of the patterns in my question, right?"

"Yes. You are bringing me from the general idea to the specific one."

"That's right. Your talent is reflected in it. Let's say I can form the ice spikes in any formation, right? What if my thoughts are only limited to one form? It'll be a waste, right?"

"I see. So, the first question is basically the potential of the ability."

"You can say it like that. You are the one who will set the limit for your own ability. Being more ambitious is a good thing, but it will surely be harder to reach it. So, think about what you want and suit your needs."

Noel nodded.

'Well, I do need my ability to be extremely powerful. But I don't really have a lot of time since the Supreme Devil Organization is targeting me. But am I going to sacrifice its potential just because I don't have a lot of time?'

Noel was in a dilemma. On the one hand, he needed a powerful ability since it would benefit him more in the long run. On the other hand, he couldn't improve his ability if he died in the process.

Noel remained silent for a few minutes. There was a thought about changing his ability. But he dismissed the idea. If he chose anything weaker, he might not have enough power to protect himself and others in the near future.

'As expected... I'm going to improve the Undying Fire. As for the first question, it's hard, but I already have two options. The first one will lead me in the future, while the second one will improve my ability drastically in a short period of time.'

Noel couldn't help but remember how he got defeated by the Supreme Devil Organization. It looked like having his ability improve took priority.

But surprisingly, Noel had a different thought.

'Dimitri is going back soon. And I can trust the people around me. If we don't have enough people, there is still Clara. We can even call other captains or even the commander. He will surely make a move since he must have heard about the Plant Lord.'

Noel took a deep breath. It seemed that he had decided on his path. His goal was also related to it, so he didn't hesitate to declare the path he chose to take in his mind.

'That's right. What kind of path do I want my Undying Fire to have? Of course, I want the Undying Fire to be free.'

Chapter 704 A New Mission

'Free' in his words meant unlimited potential. If the Undying Fire was free, it meant the fire could take shape into anything.

Of course, this kind of thought would surely lead the Undying Fire to be omnipotent. However, there was a hidden problem.

If he chose this path, it would mean the Fire could become heavy, hard, or even empty. It was already in the realm of impossibility. Anyone would surely think he was insane. There might be some ambitious and positive people that thought it was possible, but Noel was different. He might be ambitious, but he was still looking at the world realistically.

That was why the second question was like a chain that dragged his ambition to the ground, making it look reachable.

'How do I want this ability to help me? The answer is obvious. Undying Fire is a fire that is far stronger than any other flame I have seen so far. So, I want it to stay that way. I want this fire to burn everything I wish to burn.'

With this statement, Noel abandoned the possibility of having his Undying Fire turn into something else.

He had already answered the third question that asked him how to achieve it. The answer was obvious as soon as he finished answering the first two questions. He needed to improve his control over Spiritual Energy so that he could change the shape of his flame without the need of Spirit Abilities.

Last but not least, the fourth question.

'Can I proceed in mastering the ability right now?' Noel assessed his current situation. 'I already know the method and I have settled all the immediate problems, giving me some time to practice. I should be able to start practicing this technique.'

'But mastering this power will require a huge amount of effort and time. I have to be diligent and never give up if I want to succeed. That's why the fourth question is actually asking me whether I have the resolve and determination to master my ability or not.'

Noel took a deep breath as he gradually opened his eyes. He raised his head, looking at Damian.

"There are a lot of people trying to kill me. I have to be strong so that all those people won't be able to kill me. I have to survive if I want to achieve my goal. That's why please help me, Sir Damian."

Damian smiled. He already knew the answer, but he still had to confirm it from his mouth. "Have you answered those four questions?"

"Yes," Noel answered without a shred of doubt.

"I'm not going to ask the answers you have in your heart. After all, that will be the secret of your abilities. Unless you are planning to disclose the secret, I'm not in a position to force you to reveal it. However, I have to ask you... How do you want me to help?" Damian smiled.

Noel answered without hesitation. "Help me to improve my Control."

"Do you mean the Soft Approach and Hard Approach?"

"Soft Approach and Hard Approach are only a method to change the type of destructive power. However, I find something else that seems to be even more specific than these two approaches."

"In both Approaches, you are required to have a certain degree of 'control' over your Spiritual Energy. With that control, you can increase your firepower or even change the shape of your abilities. That's why I'd like to ask you to teach me how to control my Spiritual Energy."

Damian's smile couldn't help but grow bigger. Of course, he understood the concept of Control and the two Approaches. The latter was formed in order to simplify the former. But when one became as strong as him, they would return back to the very core, which was control.

Damian was surprised that Noel had chosen this way. But he liked the answer.

"Alright. I'm going to help you practice your control. Of course, I can only give the knowledge to the limit of my ability." Damian warned him that he wouldn't disclose an important secret.

Noel understood his position and politely bowed his head.

Damian began training Noel like there was no tomorrow. He was strict and harsh.

Noel didn't complain because he knew his training was effective. So, he followed his instruction no matter how hard it was.

Noel would spend the majority of his free time practicing his control. He would use the remaining time to improve his Swordsmanship and Runes. And he didn't forget to spare some time to write down the concept of Rune Engineering to fulfill his side of the agreement.

Time passed quickly. Because of the recent incident, the Demon Banner Army became even more careful. They also stopped the Demon Relief Squad from taking any action for the time being. So, Clara used this time to strengthen the squad while observing the situation.

Noel didn't have any problem with it. Though, there was one thing he had to fulfill. He had to go to Anna's side soon since there was a mission he had to complete. Because Ardagan had given him a mission, he knew that Clara would be asking the Zero Squad to leave.

In addition to Dimitri's return, he had asked Harley to begin investigating the area that he was going to visit.

Noel wasn't rushing at first. But as the date was approaching, Noel couldn't help but go to Clara to see if she had any mission for them.

Clara was stunned when Noel came to her, especially when she was wondering whether she should give them a mission or not.

In the end, Clara decided to give them a mission, which happened to be similar to the mission Ardagan gave him.

Unbeknownst to Noel, the mission would take a sharp turn for Noel. Something that he would never forget. After all, this mission connected him with Anna. And Noel would consider it to be worse than the recent defeat.

Chapter 705 Checking

Noel was sitting in a lotus pose in the backyard. A black flame was circling around him at a constant speed. Though, sometimes, the speed changed as though Noel was controlling it.

However, Noel was in the middle of his control training. He had to maintain a constant speed of his flame in order to master it.

Once in a while, he changed the form of his flame into a small bird and made it fly up and down before turning back to its original form and maintaining the same speed.

Rose had just returned after the meeting and chose to inform Noel about the result.

Since there was no one around, she called Noel by his name. "Noel. We have discussed it. We will be going on a mission again. It might be dangerous, but I want to hear your thoughts."

Noel gradually opened his eyes as the flame disappeared. "Is it the Creek Village?"

Rose widened her eyes and nodded. "How do you know?"

"Well, I have predicted it and I have asked Captain Clara. However, this time, I'm not influencing her decision or anything. So, I don't have any plans about it." Noel raised both hands, indirectly telling her not to worry since there was no hidden scheme from him.

"Hmm... Then, why do you know about the location?" Rose asked. She was his vassal. Questioning her lord might be overstepping her bound, but Noel knew she asked this because she was worried about him.

So, he said, "Because Anna's advancement mission is also in that village."

"Anna? Anna Stargaze?" Rose gasped.

"Yeah." Noel nodded. "I have been preparing for it this whole time. You should know about the brothel, right? I have tasked them to gather information about the village. And I have two Spirit Grandmasters that are as strong as Shale with me."

Noel told her about the preparation. It felt like he was opening all his cards, but he would only do it to Rose. He knew Rose was smart enough to know which one she could tell the others and which one should be kept secret. This was also a small test for Rose if she truly wanted to become his secretary.

"Then, the information has to wait until we reach the village?"

"Specifically, the town that is located not far from the village." Noel nodded.

"I understand." Rose was planning to tell a few pieces of information to the others without revealing Noel's secret. Though, she didn't forget to give Noel the details about the mission. She handed the paper. "Then."

She nodded to Noel before leaving. Noel took a glance at the paper to learn more about the mission.

Mission: Creek Village

Description: The village was attacked by demons a few months ago and when the knights arrived at that place, it was too late. All the villagers should have died. But right now, there are new villagers filling the area. It's suspicious as there is no trace of migration happening. Even the city near the village doesn't have a record of it. There is a possibility that this place is used by the Supreme Devil Organization.

Groups: Demon Relief Squad, Demon Hunting Squad, Demon Barrier Squad, Demon Beholder Squad.

'Oh, wow. It's a joint mission.' Noel frowned. On the one hand, it felt like this joint mission was an easy mission since there was a Demon Beholder Squad, Septa's group. On the other hand, the fact that four groups were involved, the Creek Village's threat level should be extremely high.

'Hmm... A joint mission, huh. And with how they want us to investigate this village that is suspected to be the den of the Supreme Devil Organization, it seems that the Demon Banner Army has finally taken a serious approach to fight the Supreme Devil Organization.'

Noel thought for a moment. As expected, the Demon Relief Squad would be a higher priority to the Supreme Devil Organization. The Demon Beholder Squad would be more suited to a covert mission like this and the Demon Hunting Squad would be their spear. Meanwhile, the Demon Barrier Squad would become their shield.

Just from this, Noel realized that they were the bait in this mission. If they came, the Creek Village would show their true nature.

"I see..." Noel thought for a moment, wondering what he should do. He had made a lot of preparation this time. In fact, all the past preparation couldn't be compared to this one. Even so, he didn't become confident. He kept being careful and considered everything before making his decision. He had learned from the last defeat after all.

"I have become stronger, but I don't think this is enough. After all, I also have a mission that will involve Anna. The reward is Force Control."

[Mission: Repaying One's Kindness.]

[Description: Anna has helped you a lot, it's time to repay her. A Rune Swordsman has always been clear with debt and gratitude. Help her finish her advancement mission in Creek Village six months from now.]

[Reward: Force Control.]

Noel furrowed his eyebrows after taking another look at the mission.

"Now that I think about it, why does the system reward me with Force Control? Right now, I am also training my own control... Don't tell me. Ardagan has predicted my defeat and what I will do?"

Noel couldn't help but feel chills down his spine. If this was correct, he could do something more about the system. In fact, he might be able to predict his own defeat and make more preparations to prevent it.

He was scared by Ardagan's clairvoyance ability, but it also motivated him to understand it better so that he wouldn't lose anymore.

Noel clenched his fists and said, "In that case, I have to become even more careful. I'm afraid this mission is going to be extremely dangerous."

Since he realized that there might be some clues within the missions Ardagan gave him. He opened the system and checked all the recent missions he got.

Chapter 706 Who Surprised Who?

Since he realized that there might be some clues within the missions Ardagan gave him. He opened the system and checked all the recent missions he got.

[Mission: Undying Fire.]

[Description: You have become the owner of the Undying Fire. Choose the path you wish to take by yourself and strive for it. Becomes the true ruler of the Undying Fire.]

[Reward: ???]

[Mission: Survive an Attack.]

[Description: The Supreme Devil Organization will launch an attack. Survive for one day.]

[Reward: 5 Random Rune Scrolls and Ardagan Swordsmanship +2 Levels.]

[Penalty: Death.]

[Mission: Peerless (2)]

[Description: To prove your might, one has to fight a few enemies of the same level. Defeat five Peak Level Demons by yourself in a single battle.]

[Reward: Union of Sword, Spiritual Step, and Elite Medal.]

[Mission: Meeting the Representative from the Greenwood Kingdom.]

[Description: You have become the center of attention of the four kingdoms. The Greenwood Kingdom has sent their representative to observe you. Determine the best outcome that you want from them.]

[Reward: Damian's cooperation.]

Noel looked at the completed missions such as the 'Survive an Attack' mission and the 'Representative' mission.

He had gotten 5 Random Rune Scrolls: Floating Rune, Rune Spear, Rune Strike, Rune Blast, and Arm Guard Rune. He also had received the two levels for the Ardagan Swordsmanship. That was why his swordsmanship was advancing by leaps and bounds during their break.

Just like the mission 'Survive an Attack' said, the penalty for failing the mission was death. Of course, it was death. There was no way Laufey wouldn't kill him.

Noel understood that if he ever received a mission with the death penalty, it meant that the mission would be extremely dangerous. There would at least be a person or demon that would kill him.

However, he was wondering what he should do with a mission that didn't have a penalty. It was more ambiguous, but he couldn't ask Ardagan for a penalty.

In the end, Noel chose to focus on the other two missions.

'There is the continuation of the Peerless Mission. The reward is extremely good, but I haven't had the chance to fight against five Peak Level Demons by myself. Maybe if there is an opportunity, I will fight them even if I have to ask the others. Last but not least, the mission about the Undying Fire. This mission has an unknown reward, but I'm still far from mastering the Undying Fire. I guess this mission will last for a long time.'

Noel furrowed his eyebrows. After looking at the mission, there didn't seem to be any clue hidden in those missions. At least the one that would be connected to the current mission.

"Well, I still have to be careful. And since there is a mission like this... It means I'm going to cooperate with Anna again. I don't know if I can ask for others' help. In any case, I will be able to fight with Anna again."

Noel couldn't help but imagine Anna's face in his mind. There was a feeling of annoyance, rivalry, and happiness mixed in his heart. He harrumphed, "You have confused me with that kiss. I'm going to pay you back. Just you wait."

Noel had an evil grin as though he had just come up with a devilish plan that would defeat Anna. Of course, he didn't forget to add, "And I will surely watch how strong Anna is. What if we fight again? Can I defeat Anna this time?"

That was just a question filled with curiosity. Whether he would do it or not was a different question.

After checking everything, Noel finally stood up and returned to the house as he had to discuss the mission with everyone else.

Since Rose had told them about Noel's stance in this mission, everyone's expression mellowed a bit. It seemed that they were still worried that he would take on everything without them realizing it.

So, they felt a bit happy that everything Noel said would have nothing hidden. Of course, except for Anna's matter.

Noel had changed during the break. He became a bit more open with the rest of the group. He had begun to trust them like that of a family.

The others also understood why Noel was scared. The Ardagan Family was strong, but it was destroyed in a single night. He must think there was no way he could rely on others. He wouldn't trust anyone other than his subordinates again.

Noel never admitted or thought about it. But that was what trauma meant. Sometimes, they didn't realize it was the trauma that caused it.

And Noel cured that trauma without him realizing its existence. This never happened in his previous life. This might also be the reason why he never had a woman in his previous life. He simply couldn't trust anyone anymore, especially women. Even though his past life might have known about the scheme between his father and the Stargaze Family, he would still hate them because of the hidden trauma.

Gradually but surely, Noel changed from his previous life. He could even make a joke about how his message could be interpreted as a proposal to Anna. That wouldn't happen in his previous life.

Of course, even Anna didn't know about Noel that much. Only the previous Noel knew what he thought and the reason behind his action.

As for the current Noel, he could trust others again and become the foundation of his future.

Finally, they were set for their journey. Just like before, Clara saw them off personally.

She gave them one last message. "Remember. You are to meet with the other groups immediately. Because Septa is focusing on the investigation of the Plant Lord and I'm focusing on another project, we can't join you in this mission."

"However, Captain Faust and Captain Igor are going to be there. With those two big dudes with you, you should feel safe, right?" Clara chuckled before turning to Noel. "That's it, Kid. Don't forget to trust the Demon Banner Army."

Noel nodded with a smile. "Thank you, Captain."

"Then, we're off."

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In a town near Creek Village called Wendell. Anna was sitting on her bed while reading a paper containing her mission.

Suddenly, she stopped reading while having a playful smile. "Ah, Noel is going to surprise me soon, right? I wonder what he has prepared for me... Let's see who surprises who. Though, you might be so surprised that you tell me about your secret. Hehehe."

Chapter 707 Arrival

Since the village was bad news, the group obviously had to remain in the city and group up with the rest.

"So, this is Wedell..." Noel looked around the town. It was bustling with people and he didn't find anything that made him sour. There were still some people who didn't even have a basic need, but their number was certainly far lower than all the cities he had seen.

He thought this city was better than he originally thought. Since this was a covert mission, there was a chance that the enemy was hiding some spies inside the town. So, all four groups had to stay in different inns.

The Demon Relief Squad was placed in the Go Goat Inn. It wasn't the best inn in the city, but they weren't that bad either. So, there was no complaint from the members of the squad.

They gathered in one room to discuss what they had to do.

Paul gave them a briefing. "Alright. Since we have arrived in this city, we'll be meeting the other groups tonight. Of course, all of us can't go. I can only bring one or two people with me. So, I guess Iadre and Rose will be with me."

Surprisingly, Noel raised his hand and said, "I'll pass this time. You should ask Ben to go with you. I have to meet some people in this city. Of course, I'm not talking about hidden schemes or anything. I just want to gather some information."

They looked at each other before Paul nodded, agreeing to Noel's decision. "Alright then. You are free to go anywhere. But if you get into any problem, make sure to tell us immediately."

"Got it." Noel nodded with a serious expression.

Since they had come to an agreement, Paul dismissed the group, telling them they could do whatever they wanted before the operation started.

Noel didn't waste any time. He headed straight to the place where he could get that information.

But people would surely misunderstand Noel when he visited this kind of place as soon as he arrived in the city.

Yes, the place he visited was none other than the brothel, specifically the Sleeping Flower Brothel.

The sun was about to set, so the brothel was ready to open. The women began to enter the brothel, preparing to take customers.

But since they hadn't officially opened, there was no one who came to Noel to persuade him to spend some time inside.

That was normal, and it was more convenient for him. After all, he could enter the brothel without any suspicion or judging stares.

But when he was about to take a step forward, someone suddenly hugged his right arm. A sweet perfume entered his nose and he felt the soft sensation wrapping his arms. A seductive voice whispered to him. "It seems Sir wants to visit us. Please don't hesitate to enter and pick me, I'll give you a good time."

Noel was startled, thinking there was a woman from the brothel that approached him. And since other women didn't even bother to look at him, he thought this person must be an influential person since she might know about his identity.

The woman didn't hesitate and dragged him inside the brothel. It seemed that she was trying to stop him from looking at her, but Noel noticed the familiar figure and hair. It didn't take too long for him to realize who she actually was.

"A—" As he was about to call her, the woman picked up the pace and finally dragged him inside.

She didn't hesitate to bring Noel to the receptionist, who was still cleaning the table. The receptionist obviously didn't recognize this woman, but the woman didn't do anything as though she was waiting for the man to do something.

Noel couldn't help but make an awkward smile while taking out a badge and putting it on top of the table. "Can I see the manager?"

It seemed the receptionist recognized the badge. She hurriedly grabbed it as if she was trying to prevent anyone from seeing it.

She dropped her mop and put on a big smile. She extended her hand to the side and said, "Please. I'll lead you to our VIP Room."

Noel nodded with a smile. Both of them followed the receptionist to the room on the highest floor. It was a wide room. But since this was a brothel, the bed was big and there were many decorations that could be used for a lot of things. He could even see some cabinets filled with tools and salves.

When the receptionist left the room after asking him to wait in this room, Noel finally sighed while glancing to the side. "So, what are you doing here, Anna?"

Anna stepped forward. Her hands were still hugging his arm. She looked at him with a playful smile. "Hehe. Do you think I don't know you're going to this brothel as soon as you arrive in the city? You told me that you're going to surprise me in six months, so I calculated that you'll visit this city, specifically the brothel, to get the information."

Noel shook his head in defeat. Anna had truly changed. One year ago, she wouldn't be able to see through him. But right now, she managed to move ahead of him.

"So, I'm wondering what kind of surprise you have for me." Her smirk was indirectly telling him that she wouldn't be surprised by something normal. Unless it was something beyond her imagination, she would surely be disappointed.

And it seemed that Noel had taken up the challenge.

"Before that, I wonder why you need to act like one of the women from the brothel." Noel suddenly dragged her to the sofa and put her down.

After that, he placed his hands next to her shoulders to prevent her from escaping.

Anna was startled. She raised her head and saw Noel's face approaching her from above. Her heart couldn't help but beat rapidly, remembering the time Dimitri sent her Noel's message that could easily be misunderstood.

Chapter 708 Teasing

Six months ago.

Anna had just finished the day and was about to sleep. But suddenly, her instinct picked up a danger.

It was a tad too late, but the danger didn't do anything to her. So, she turned around while shouting, "Who?!"

Dimitri didn't reply to her. He remained inside the shadow. However, he left a box that contained all the items that Noel wanted to give Anna.

Before leaving, Dimitri's voice echoed inside the room. "My Master wants to give you a big surprise in six months."

Anna couldn't react or reply as the danger suddenly disappeared. Even her instinct told her that the person had left.

When she opened the book, she realized who sent him. It was Noel.

"Hu..." Anna let out a breath of relief, knowing that it wasn't an enemy. "I can understand that he doesn't want me to see him, but still, it's too nerve-wracking. But..."

Anna fell silent and recalled his words. "He said Noel wants to give me a big surprise in six months... Huh? What kind of surprise?"

Anna tilted her head in confusion. No matter how hard she thought about it, nothing came to her mind.

However, she didn't forget that she had just kissed Noel's cheek not long ago.

"Wait a minute... Don't tell me he took that kiss seriously? I mean, it's truly easily misunderstood, but he's not going to say he'll take responsibility or something, right?" Anna looked up.

She couldn't help but imagine what if her guess came true. What if Noel suddenly wanted to take responsibility and marry her?

"I mean, Noel is a great man. Even with my previous life's memory, he can still match my progress. Maybe, my own progress stimulates him to make faster progress. If I play my cards right, I don't have any doubt that I can become one of the strongest people in the world. And if he is truly by my side like this, won't it mean that both of us will become the strongest couple..."

Anna fell silent. On the one hand, she loved how it would be. Strong nobles usually had multiple wives. The wives got a huge advantage even if they didn't become the main wife since their family would benefit from the connection, and the more wives the noble took, the bigger their influence would be. So, having more wives was proof of power and a symbol of protection. The same applied the other way around, but they had one big problem, which was the successor. After all, there was only one person who could give birth in the family.

On the other hand, she couldn't imagine what the world would become if she truly got together with Noel. It might be because of what happened in the previous life that the thought never occurred in her mind. They were arch-nemesis, so it was impossible for them to get together.

But because, in their current life, their relationship was quite good, she couldn't help but imagine that kind of possibility.

"W-wait a minute!" Anna was flustered. "What am I even thinking... Even in the past life, Noel has never touched any women. I know that he is not planning to get closer to anyone unless he has achieved his ultimate goal."

Anna nodded, convincing herself. And that goal would be long in the future. By that time, she would have passed the age of marriage, so they wouldn't be together at that time. That was how she convinced herself.

...

However, when Anna had to face this situation directly, she couldn't help but think she might be wrong.

Noel was staring into her eyes intensely as if he couldn't get enough of her. And with what he said earlier, it felt like Noel wanted to take advantage of her simple play to enter the brothel into an opportunity.

'Wait a minute. He is not going to do it, right?' Anna's heart began to beat rapidly. She wondered what Noel planned to do. 'No, wait a minute. Maybe he wants to pay me back for that one? But he might do the same thing, right?'

Anna gulped down, thinking Noel wanted to kiss her the same way as she did. Noel always paid someone back, especially if it was a grudge after all.

So, she shut her eyes tight while closing her mouth, waiting for Noel to do it.

But to her surprise, Noel ended up flicking her forehead.

"Ouch! What are you doing?" Anna immediately covered her forehead while glaring at Noel.

But in that instant, she realized Noel was just trying to tease her.

Noel had a cheeky smirk as though he had achieved his objective. He couldn't help but tease her, "What are you doing? Don't tell me... you are expecting something? Ah, right. You were the one who kissed my cheek. Maybe, it's you who is trying to seduce me this whole time."

"You might be beautiful and we might be friends, but please don't overstep your bounds, alright?" Noel chuckled.

Anna's face was red, not because of anger but because of embarrassment. She clenched her teeth.

She wanted to get angry, but if she shouted here, it was the same as acknowledging her defeat. There was no way she would do it after Noel teased her like this.

Even if she was embarrassed, she still tried to make a smile while asking, "What? You are still thinking about that small kiss? I was just trying to thank you for your help, Noel. Don't tell me, you couldn't forget about it? Is it because I was the one that gave you the memory? That's why you are like this. You just can't be honest with yourself."

Anna also giggled, teasing Noel back.

Both of them were glaring at each other. Their eyebrows twitched, knowing their opponent was tough to crack.

Though, they were interrupted by the sound of the door that was slightly opened.

"Ehm... Am I interrupting something?" A woman with brown hair took a peek while asking. She didn't dare to enter when she saw these two having fun.

She pointed her finger to the cabinets in the corner of the room and said, "Since you are here for the first time, you can find all the lubes and medicine in the cabinet over there."

"..."

Chapter 709 Information

"I'm sure that you're already aware of the request. So, I won't beat around the bush." Noel's expression became serious. He now sat next to Anna, facing the brothel manager. He asked, "So, do you have any information about the Creek Village?"

"We have been sorting out a lot of information about the Creek Village." The manager nodded and handed him a few pages of paper. "These are the things we can find about it."

Noel and Anna took a look at the paper, trying to understand their current situation. While they were reading, the manager began to summarize the information.

"Basically, Creek Village was not very popular in the past. It's considered one of the poorest villages in the vicinity."

"However, there was a sudden demon outbreak that directly hit the village. The demons also attacked this city. But because the level of the demons was quite low, the town easily eliminated the threat. Still, the Creek Village couldn't survive the demons' onslaught and got exterminated."

"Because the Creek Village's position wasn't that strategic for business, the authority decided to give up on that village until one month ago. They finally allowed people to migrate to this village."

"We don't know the exact reason, but there is an increase in demon activity in that place. So, we decided not to enter the village so as not to alert them."

"However, we still can't understand what's going on with the Creek Village. We've been collecting rumors, but there are only two that seem to match the current condition. There is a possibility that the authority found something in Creek Village and tried to get it. Or...There is a chance that the Creek Village is hiding something ominous, like a group of bandits or something."

Noel looked down, assessing the situation. He glanced at Anna and asked, "What is your mission, by the way?"

"I am planning to investigate the lord of this city. There is a weird movement in Creek Village, so this should be related to the lord of the city. For now, I'm planning to investigate Creek Village and find a connection." Anna explained. "The Lord is quite eccentric, so I have to be careful. After all, both the current generation of Count Heirden and the previous patriarch are Spirit Grandmasters."

Noel furrowed his eyebrows. "So, do you think there is a chance that this village is related to the Supreme Devil Organization?"

"I won't deny the possibility. But the two are Spirit Grandmasters, and the previous lord is still holding his title as the Fist Arbiter. So, I don't know if they are truly cooperating with them or if they don't know about them." Anna shook her head helplessly.

"Your mission is quite dangerous, huh?" Noel knew Anna was going to advance to the next rank as an inquisitor. If she succeeded in this mission, she only needed to advance one more rank before she finally had a status high enough to challenge the current arbiters.

Still, with the Royal Family trying to grasp Anna, they might force the Fist Arbiter and his son to do something during this mission.

"Things are getting complicated." Noel looked at the manager and said, "Do you have anything to say about it?"

The manager was quite surprised by the question. She politely shook her head. "If Sir is talking about the matter related to the Demon Banner Army or the Inquisitor, I have nothing to say since I'm not a part of them. However, if Sir wants my opinion regarding the current lord and the previous lord, I can say for certain that they are great men.

"They love their people, and the city has been prosperous. If Sir wants to do anything to them, the townspeople might not agree with you."

Noel pinched the bridge of his nose. "I see. Do you have any maps for this region? Especially the Creek Village."

The manager nodded and left the room for a bit to retrieve the map.

The Creek Village was located not far from the town. They were situated between a mountain and a river. They had to cross the river first if they wanted to enter the village and due to the steep hill, they would have a hard time reaching the village.

However, due to how steep it was, Creek Village had trouble generating income. That was why they became one of the poorest villages in the region.

Noel suddenly felt something wrong when he looked at the map. Anna seemed to understand a little bit and said, "This is quite dangerous."

The manager tilted her head in confusion. Although she was educated enough to deal with the information network and the brothel, she wasn't that good at reading a map.

Since the manager might have another input or piece of information that she thought was unnecessary, Noel tried to explain the situation to jog her memory.

He pointed at the river and asked, "What's the situation of this river?"

"Anguala River is a river that runs through five nobles' territories. Since it's located near the mountain where it originates, as well as due to how steep the mountain is, the flow of the river is quite powerful. It's shallow, but the river flow will surely destroy anything on its path if you try to make a dam for it."

"The bridge that connects the outside world and the village took at least twenty lives when it was built."

Noel nodded and continued, "That's why if we cross this bridge and the enemy destroys it, we will have no choice but to go around the mountain. But due to how steep it is, we will have trouble going around it. This will be a perfect place to execute us."

"Ah!" The manager had come to a realization. It would be troublesome if there were strong people hiding there. And if they added the possibility that the two lords were going to ambush them as well, the situation became trickier.

"So, do you have anything else that can be useful in the current situation?" Noel asked.

The manager looked down, falling into deep thought. After a minute, her expression changed as she said, "I think I have one."

Chapter 710 Reward

"I think I have one." The manager took another map from her room. It was a similar map, but with a few markings near Creek Village. "Please take a look at this."

They all glued their eyes on Creek Village. The manager pointed at the marker not far from Creek Village.

"There is actually a small tunnel in this place. One of our customers is actually the first young master of Count Heirden. When he was drunk, he told us that there was a secret passage leading to the other side of the mountain. They actually took advantage of the steep mountain and built a tunnel underneath it. This way, anyone that tried to pursue them would have to loop around the mountain, which would take a significant amount of time."

"!!!" Noel and Anna widened their eyes. They recognized how important this information was.

"How can I say this... You are truly good." Noel scratched the back of his head, praising the manager.

"We'll do our best to gather the information. Besides, all the girls are working together. So, I don't deserve your praise."

Noel smiled and said to Anna, "In that case, we'll check the passage first. There might be a chance that we have to use it. Of course, we need to locate and map the passage. We might be able to find a spot where we can dig to turn it into our escape route."

"That's indeed the case."

"I'll try to delay the movement of the Demon Banner Army," Noel added.

"In that case, I'll locate the passage." Anna nodded in agreement.

With this escape route, he felt a bit secure if he wanted to proceed with the mission.

Lastly, he asked the manager, "Will you have any problems if I take advantage of the passage?"

"I don't think the first young son of Count Heirden is aware of the leak of information."

"Still, if there are any problems, you and the girls should retreat immediately. Also, do you have any requests? Those who work will be rewarded. So, I'm planning to give you something." Noel asked.

"I don't have any personal requests. I'm already blessed to have a good house and living conditions. My job might not be honorable, but I can live with this. So, I'm satisfied. But..." The manager paused for a moment. "This might be presumptuous for me to ask, but our girls are mostly trained in the slum. They are those who want to change their lives and can only do this type of thing."

"Two of them are facing a problem right now. Their houses were seized not long ago, so they had been sleeping in the brothel for the past two weeks. Actually, one of them was the one who received the information about the secret passage."

Noel didn't hesitate to ask the manager. "What's the price of a house in this city?"

The manager felt happy that Noel was that considerate. However, she knew that asking too much would anger Noel instead. So she thought about it and said, "350 gold coins should be enough for a house."

"350 coins, huh?" Noel glanced at Anna. "How much do you have?"

"I'm the one who pays?" Anna's eyebrows twitched.

"Not entirely. Just give me some money since you've benefited from it."

"But you said you're going to surprise me... Don't tell me this is what you mean by surprise?" Anna looked disappointed.

However, Noel let out a sigh and explained what he wanted. "I'm just asking for a few gold coins. This should let them stay in a better inn for one month. I have my own savings, but it's all located at the Demon Relief Squad headquarters. So, I have to let them stay in a proper place until I go back and send the money."

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Miss." The manager seemed overjoyed when hearing the little discussion. 350 gold coins weren't a small sum for people like them. Even the manager had to save for a few years before she could afford her current home.

However, for Noel, 350 gold coins weren't that big. A Peak Level Demon Crystal alone could fetch up to fifty gold coins. As a Spirit Master, 350 gold coins were something that could be gained within one week. And it would be even easier when he became a Spirit Grandmaster.

And since he hadn't become a lord, which required him to take care of his spending, he could splurge a little. After all, the information was useful, and his life was far beyond 350 gold coins.

Noel thought for a moment and said, "From the way you word it, it seems that the house barely fits the requirement. I want you to buy them a better house, but not too good since I don't want others to feel jealous.

"So, I think 400 gold coins should be enough. If there is anything left, you can use it to treat the women with something nice."

"Yes, Sir." The manager lowered her head. She couldn't thank him enough.

Noel could see the honesty and care the manager had for her people. So he didn't feel like he had thrown away a lot of money.

Besides, the information was truly precious, considering it could save him and all the people that participated in the mission.

"Since we're done here, I'll be leaving." Noel took a look at Anna and said, "For now, we'll meet again in the South Gate, let's say, one day from now, at dusk. If both of us don't appear, then assume something has happened."

Anna nodded with a serious expression. They had a lot of preparation this time, especially for the escape route. Noel wanted to be extra careful and made sure he wouldn't lose even if he couldn't accomplish the mission.

All of them rose from their seats and headed straight to the door. Before leaving, Noel stopped and asked, "If possible, I want you to monitor the movement around the town. There are chances that some spies are mixing with the people. So, be careful. If there's any important information, you can go to the Go Goat Inn, room 7, to inform me."

"Yes, Sir."